

[Interview with Vito Cacciola #16]

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INTERVIEW

WITH

PETER CACCIOLA

GERMAN PRISON CAMP

by Merton R. Lovett

“As well as remembered”

INTERVIEW

with

PETER CACCIOLA (German Prison Camp)

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“Well, Mr. Lovett, the mosta I remember of that marcha to Germany, was how hungry I feela. Soma times, now, when I smella de chicken cooking, I gotta laugh, and tink of dose Germans. By G-d I hata dose swine, what guarda us. De keepa de bayonets all ready to sticka in. De shouta 'Forwards! Forwards!' My belly, it was ache and shuta up like de accordian. My feets bleeda. Sometimes de Germans eata de piece of black bread. De prisoners is so hungry de wanta killa him.

“One night I see in de field, some turnip, — no whata you call it, — de beet, de sugar beets. De German is marcha beside fifty feet before. I sneaka into de field. I crawla on de belly. I steala five of de beets.

“De is bigga beets, so big as de head. I eata one all raw. It maka my belly swella out like dis. Den I getta safe back with de Italians. Soon we maka de stop for night.

“De Italians all bega for de beet. De offer me de money for dem. I sella two for one lire. One I give to my pal.

“De prison was in Saxony. In it wasa thirteen thousand soldiers.

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“After we was wash-ed, de German doctors sticka us with needles. Yes, that's it, for de tpphus fever and de anti cholera. For forty days we was keepa by ourselves. Only through de barb wire could we talka with de oder prisoners.

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"Sure, we maka music and sing. Some Italian hava mandolin. De food geta no better. One day de week we geta five smalla potatos. Lost times we has de cabbage soup, — little cabbage, mucha water.

"Yes, we geta de dark bread. Five men geta one loaf eacha day. You should see how we maka divide de bread.

"One man of de five is choos-ed for to cut de bread. We pointa and counta to de men lika dis. Yes, it's lika you say, 'enie, meanie, mine, mo.'

"De man what is pick-ed, he cutta de bread in five pieca. He's always getta de last piece.

"Den we counta some more and de man what is next choos-ed maka de first pick. Den de next and de next."

"I lika best de British prisoner. I talka good English. I talka with them. De wanta hear about de war on Italian front. I maka two chums. [We?] is unseperat-ed. One is name Babe Wood.

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He's coma from Newfoundland. De oder is Buck Davis. He liva in Manchester, England.

"When he tella me he liva in Manchester, I say good, we is de neighbor. I liva in Beverly. 'Where de hell is Beverly?' he ask. 'Does you knowa anyone in Boston?' I inquest-ed. 'Ha! Ha!' he say, 'so you is one of de damned Yankees.'

"De prisoners geta mucha work. We is paid six pfennings every day. We maka de sewer. We builda de house. One new city de prisoners make. It is called Samara.

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"We rida on de train. I ricollect one journey. We was in de railroad car. De conductor was de German woman. She was so beautiful. All de peoples what runna de train, except de enginman, was de woman.

"Dis girl she taka de ticket. She smila mucha sweet. In de uniform she looka like de movie actress. Her hair is curla and de color lika corn.

"We talka about her in de English. Buck Davis tella her she is lovely babee. We maka much praise. Everyone would lika her for girls friend.

"When we getta off train, I may to her in de English, 'Goodbye sweetheart. I could lova you. When I see you again?'

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"What you know, Mr. Lovett. That German girl understanda de English. I was very much ashame-ed. She say, 'Gooda Luck, Tommy. I hoba you came back dis train.' By Jee, I hoba I do."

"De Germans de watcha us like de priest. It's a good thing for them. I was de brick mason. If I geta a chance I spoila de work. I no get a chance.

"Yes, de was some, what you said, sabotage. Not so much. [De?] is one [guard?] every four, five prisoners.

"I remember de was one Australian prisoner. De was harda men, de Australians. I know right away de stand no funny business.

"One day dis Australian he fixa de beam, what holds up de corner. It falla down and maka big smash. A German officer he come along and knocka him down with revolver. Den de puta him in de hoosegow, you call it.

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"By and by de releas-ed him. Den de make him carry de hod wid motar. One day dat Australian is carry motar up de ladder three story. He see de German officer on de ground. He pusha de piece of new wall over. Two, three hundred brick falla on de German's head.

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"De Australian he swear and he laughs. Then he jumpa far and run. I don't never know what happens to him. We never see him no more."

"De British soldiers geta parcels from England. De hava cans of food, de chocolate and nica tings to eat. They shara with me. When I geta box from my country, I divida with them.

"With De money what we earns, we can buya some extries to eata. In de evening we aska de guard to take us to de market. I try ona time to buy de onions. 'Has you got de ticket?' de business man aska. Mucha trouble de [Germans?] has to geta de food. De must getta de tickets from City Hall.

"In de fall 1918, we is mov-ed to de province of Thuringen. A contractor has buy-ed us. We is mucha sick of de war. What is happen in Itally I do not know. De Germans is keep us discouraged. They printa for us a bulletin every day. De say de Russians is maka peace, de French and Americans hava suffer much defeat.

"De food it is much less. De German childrens don't get enough to eata. For amusement we maka drama and music. One time I acta part. I was dressa up like a woman. I acta de little match girl. I am cloth-ed like poor little girl.

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I sella de matches and sing. De German officers lika my talent. They maka believe flirta with me. They giva me beer and de cake and cigarettes.

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"Buck Davis, he is de sharka with cards. He playa much. [Mosta?] time he playa with some Russians. Sometimes he has mucha money, so mucha as five hundred marks. Den we eata [good?]. Some times he is broka.

"We liva dis time in big warehouse, on de third floor. De is seventeen in one room. De window is covered witha barb-ed wire.

"In de night, we taka out some of de wire. Four or five of us goes out. It is high, thirty feet. We maka rope of de blankets.

"Three, four miles away is big field of potatoes. We sneaka there. We crawla in de field. We does not pulla up de plant. Thata way we would maka trouble. De would puta de watch.

"No, we is smarta. We reacha de hand in de dirt. We feela under de plant. We pulla out from each two or three potatoes. Then we smootha de soil and fixa him good. When de sack isa full we sneaka back.

"Perhaps de guard is blinda and deafa. We greasa de hand.

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"We getta ready for bada winter. We bury in old cella half a ton potatoes.

"One Italian getta de love. He sneaka out and visit de German girl. He kissa de hand at us. He rolla de eyes. He boasta she is mucha lovely. He laugh and say she is mucha [hot?]. But one night he is catch-ed. We waita but he no comes back. Perhaps de husband finda him. Perhaps de German officers getta jealous.

"Den de is greata news. De war it is stop. We is crazy with joy. We getta de beer & de wine. De Germans cara no more.

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"One day my chums tella me, we is goin' to leava here tomorrow. Why, de request, don't I goa with them?"

"But I deplore, how can I go with you? I [seara?] de wrong uniform.

"De say de is going in a hospital train. De wounded English take four cars. De is four more cars for some of de British soldiers.

"We maka de plan. They getta me a British uniform. De say, 'We is marcha to de station. You sneaka in de line at last moment. We taka care of you.'

"By jingo, I do dat. I fella frighten. We getta on de train allrighta. I sit wid my chums. De passa us each 8 three cigarettes. We is happy with joy enough to breaks our hearts.

"Den I see de Sergeant Major. He is starta in de car to get de names of de soldiers, de company and de number. I say, Babe, I gotta go. I ama finish-ed.

"He say, 'Don't be foolish. Ain't you smarta enough to maka a name? Staya here.'

"What you tink? I remember de first boss what I had in America. I tella de Sargeant Major I was John Sedgewick. I maka up de number. He aska no more questions. I was safa.

"In Cologne, we gota bath and new British uniforms, also mucha eat and de whiskey.

"With my chums, I wenta to Brussels and to London. From there I taka boat to Napoli.

"Sometimes, I writa dose friends. Sometime maybe I can go to Newfoundland, and seea Babe Wood.

"How mucha distant is Newfoundland, Mr. Lovett? And what kind of country is that, where he liva?"